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Again. I would like to begin. Again. I would like to begin. Again. I would like to begin. Again. I would like to begin. Again. I would like to begin. Again. I would like to begin. And again. I would like to begin. Again. I would like to begin. Again I would like to begin. And again. I would like to begin. Again and again. I would like to begin. I would like to begin again and again. And again. I would like again to begin. I would like again to begin and again. I would like to begin again. I would like to begin again with these words. With these words: I would like to begin again. With these words I would like to begin again. With these words I would like to begin. I would like to begin with these words. I would like to begin by having already begun. I would like to begin again but I am repeating myself with these words I am repeating myself again I would like to begin again. But I am repeating myself. With these words I am repeating myself again. I begin by repeating myself. I begin by repeating myself. I would like to begin by repeating myself. I begin by repeating myself. I would like to begin something new by repeating these words but I am repeating myself again. I would like to begin something new by repeating these words but I am repeating myself again. I would like to begin something new by repeating these words but I am repeating myself again. I would like to begin something new by repeating these words but I am repeating myself again. Begin with these words to begin with these words to begin with these words to begin with these words. The word begins the word begins again the word begins again the word begins again the word begins. Again the word begins again. The word begins in the beginning of a word. The word begins again. Again the word begins in the beginning of a breath begins with a quiver in the throat, the word begins again before the thought begins in a flutter of air, a flutter in the chest, a touch of soft breeze against feathered tissue like a glance through a curtain or a bird practising for flight. What is it? I glance up. What is it? A curtain. What is it? A window. What is it? A bird. What is it? What is it. What is it. What is it. A flutter: What is it. What is it. What is it. What is it that begins? What is it what is it what is it. A-flutter. What is it what is it what is it. What is it that begins to move? What is it? What is it that begins? What is it that begins to move? What is it that begins to move me? I would like to begin again. I would like to begin again by repeating these words. These words again. Imagine that I am here in front of you, and that my mouth begins to open and close to let air in and out, and that the air expands against my thoughts until they have nowhere else to go, and that they are pushed out onto my tongue into these words. Again. These words. Again. How do I begin? Again. Imagine that I am saying these words: How do I begin? How do I choose the words to begin? I begin by choosing. I begin by choosing these words again. These words I always would have chosen because these are the words with which I begin. I begin by choosing what I always would have chosen. If these are my words and if there could ever be such a thing as my words then I would always choose to begin this way, with these words again. I begin by choosing these words to begin again by repeating these words again, and so I begin with choice already being something which chooses me. What is it? What is it? What is it that chooses? What is it that begins? What is it? What is it that begins as I begin? I begin inside someone else's body, and that body has already begun performing.

New York, April 1975.

I would like to begin.

I would like to begin with the idea of 'readiness potential', a phenomenon discovered in the 1960s at the University of Freiburg, where neurologists Hans Helmut Kornhuber and Lüder Deecke teased out from close analyses of electroencephalograms the observation that voluntary acts of movement are accompanied by a detectable shift in the electric potential of the brain. That is: there is a brain twitch that accompanies a finger twitch. Maybe no surprise there.

But in a later series of experiments, Benjamin Libet (1985) demonstrated a more complicated set of interrelations. In one of his well-known (and somewhat contested) experiments, subjects were asked to watch a rotating dot on a kind-of clock, to decide at an arbitrary time to move their finger (which was recorded mechanically), and at the same time to note the time on the clock when they made their decision. Consistently, the time that the subjects noted the intention to move preceded the actual movement by two-tenths of a second. This could be a measurement of the speed of thought – it takes two-tenths of a second between deciding to move and the body moving.

Measurements of readiness potential, however, revealed a more surprising phenomenon. They showed fluctuations in the brain an additional three-tenths of a second, and sometimes up to a whole second, before the time noted by the subject at which they were conscious of having made a choice. That is, somewhere around half a second before you move your finger, some part of your brain begins to act. But only later are you aware of your decision to move. So the question is, who or what is it that has decided to move, if we only become conscious of the decision after it has already been made?

The current scientific picture of the self depicts it as constituted by a multitude of different systems, wired to different parts of our bodies and our sensory experiences, sometimes working in sympathy but more often with conflicting impulses and agendas. All of this takes place below the surface of consciousness; a thought begins before it is born, arising to consciousness out of a messy tangle of electricity and matter. The most recent studies use magnetic resonance imaging in order to locate where these various impulses arise; they note that different parts of the brain are activated when subjects are asked to pay attention to the urge to move, rather than to the movement itself. It is not as simple as cause and effect, and no clear explanation exists. One hypothesis is that there is a modelling centre within the brain that takes copies of impulses sent to the muscles and starts to imagine their outcomes – but we aren't even aware of this (Eagleman 2004, 1145). Or perhaps intentionality itself is something we retrospectively invent; in the words of David Eagleman, it is 'an illusion arising from *watching yourself* […] make actions (1146). Elsewhere, Eagleman writes, 'The conscious mind is not at the center of action in the brain; instead, it is far out on a distant edge, hearing but whispers of activity' (2011, 16). We are, it might be said, unreliable spectators getting only a partial glimpse of the show.

I begin by listening to whispers.

What is the readiness potential of the theatre? In this kind of set-up we often find ourselves in a strange temporality. We describe the way we begin the process of making performance with the word 'rehearsal', as if we are looking back at a previous action, a repetition, a re-enactment, even as we look forward to an event that does not yet exist. We recollect forward while remembering backward. We rehearse the future into being. But how can you rehearse something that doesn't yet exist? Or might it be that it already exists – here, waiting, in the readiness potential of these rooms we call 'rehearsal rooms'? Of these bodies, of our histories and the histories that came before us? In this 'blank' space?

If I close my eyes here I imagine that I can hear you breathing.

Before they disbanded, the performance company Goat Island used to announce on the front page of their website, 'We have discovered a performance by making it.' In *The*

*Lastmaker* (2007), their final performance, Karen Christopher re-enacts, but also practises as if in rehearsal, a stand-up routine that references Lenny Bruce and George Carlin. 'There's a moment coming,' she says. 'It's not here yet. It's on the way. It's still in the future.' She waits. I wait. We wait. 'Here it is! Oh, it's gone.' Around and around it goes, as we try to catch up with ourselves, listening, waiting, on a distant edge.

Again.

Another performance piece called *In Eldersfield – Chapter One* (2011), devised by the company Kings of England, structures itself around an absent present. Subtitled *Elegy for Paul Dirac*, it positions itself in relation to an anecdote about Dirac, one of the pioneers of quantum mechanics, and someone who was probably somewhere on the autistic spectrum. *Where are you going on your holidays?* he was asked by a laboratory colleague, the story goes. Twenty minutes later – after twenty minutes of silence – he replied,

*Why do you want to know?*

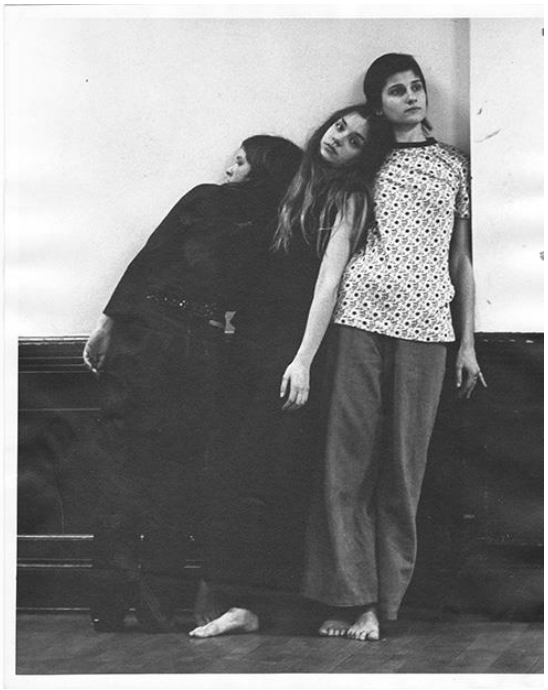
At the centre of their performance piece, Kings of England stage, or re-stage, this silence. The colleague's question is asked. And then the performers do nothing. They wait. I wait. We wait. The audience fidgets. There are constant patters of whispering, like rainfall, fluttering in the room. I hear stifled laughter that at first sounds like weeping. Bodies begin to leave the room: noisy, quick, awkward. A person behind me whispers loudly to a companion: 'This is some kind of performance art thing. And I'm not going to buy into it. I'm not going to stay here. I'm not going to be a part of it.' She continues to whisper complaints like this for the duration of the silence, and is still doing so when the silence is ended.

In what time, what kind of time, does this silence take place? It represents another silence, doubles it, refers to it, reflects it, in the way that all theatrical gestures do; and it also *is* a silence, palpably, uncomfortably, in the here and now. At the beginning of the piece, performer Simon Bowes says, 'We are gathered here to stage Dirac's most notorious silence, not to close it, but to hold it open – in an invocation.' What is it to hold open a hole within a performance, and what does that hole enfold within it? For I am acutely aware of being enclosed within it, what it sounds like, what it feels and tastes like, what it's like to have my body held within in – and so is my neighbour with the noisy whisper. Even as she refuses to be a part of it, she is part of it. In this way, we might think of performance as being that which attempts to hold that within which it is itself held.

Why do you want to know?

These words that you are reading now, that you might imagine filling my mouth – what is it that they are held within? When did these thoughts begin? In the 1970s, the Tisch School of the Arts at NYU began a new MFA programme in dance. You didn't need to have any dance training to be part of this programme. In fact it was a bit of a disadvantage. That wasn't the kind of potential they were looking for. You would be taught by people like Tricia Brown or Steve Paxton or David Gordon. Your 'teaching', such as it was, might consist of walking in circles around the room; rolling around in loose clothing; listening to records.

This is my mother, the figure in mid-air, before she knew she would be a mother.



But *I* cannot look at this image without seeing this as part of *my* story. She is looking at me, through me, like me, ahead to me, back to me.

This is my father, behind the piano, before he knew he would be a father.

Later, they moved out of New York. I grew up elsewhere. I didn't know about any of this. I didn't know that my parents were there when *Einstein on the Beach* played the Metropolitan Opera House in 1976, or that they saw Meredith Monk's opera in the Wooster Street carpark in 1972, or that they were at an early reading of Spalding Gray's first monologue. I didn't know about any of this.

And here I am now.

With these words: here I am now.

What is the readiness potential of the theatre? When does a movement begin? It begins before it begins, with the hum of the room and the colour of the floor and the texture of the door. It can be fixed here. These things hold it up, hold it forward, let it lean out into space, precarious, but bound. An imagined finger twitches. A different finger responds. My mother leaps there. I land here. What holds two moments together? What makes them part of the same event?

Here, it's the past, still walking around inside me.

Out there, it's you, reading these words as the light changes around you.

What is it?

What is it that moves us to act? This is the question pursued by Susan Sontag across her book-length essay, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), in which Sontag criticizes two different responses we might have when faced with images of suffering. On the one hand, she is concerned about the extent to which we might become numb to such images, anaesthetized against any response. She argues against the rise of an overly aesthetic perspective that cynically accepts the diminishing effectiveness of the image in a society saturated with spectacle. She writes,

> Critics of modernity, consumers of violence as spectacle, adepts of proximity without risk, are schooled to be cynical about the possibility of sincerity. Some people will do anything to keep themselves from being moved. (99)

But Sontag is equally concerned about the opposite reaction, one that overly identifies with the reality of the suffering being represented. Here the problem is not avoiding being moved, but instead being moved – and having an emotional or sympathetic response – as yet another way of avoiding the implications of the image. She writes,

> The imaginary proximity to the suffering inflicted on others that is granted by images suggests a link between the faraway sufferers […] and the privileged viewer that is simply untrue, that is yet one more mystification of our real relations to power. So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. (91)

This tension runs throughout the book, making it difficult to tell if Sontag thinks there could ever be an appropriate response to representations of suffering that is anything other than direct action against the causes of violence. She seems to suggest that part of the difficulty of having an 'appropriate' response to images of suffering is that there is not an appropriate place for that response to happen, no place where the images do not become bound up in other concerns – trying to sell us something, or competing with distractions, or part of a commentary about art.

But at the end of the book, Sontag finishes with an unexpected example of a representation of violence and suffering that might escape these dilemmas. She writes about a highly stylized work by Jeff Wall, called *Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)* (1992). It's a large photographic mural that depicts thirteen dead or dying Soviet soldiers in a jagged landscape, the soldiers still actively conversing and joking with each other even though some of them are missing limbs or large sections of their skulls.

The image is obviously staged; Wall never visited Afghanistan, and the image was produced in his studio through painstaking compositing of carefully produced images. And so it's a surprising example for Sontag to finish with; its staged-ness, its theatricality, might seem to be only further away from the serious response that Sontag is looking for. And yet, it might be exactly these theatrical elements that are most relevant. Sontag writes, 'These dead are supremely uninterested in the living: in those who took their lives, in witnesses – and in us' (113). What is important is that nothing is asked of us by these figures, who, anyway, *aren't even real*. No action is possible – the only thing left to do is to look. If *Regarding the Pain of Others* asks what the appropriate response is to images of suffering, then maybe the clue is in the title: *to regard*, and nothing more.

Philosopher Stanley Cavell argued something similar in his essay on *King Lear* and the value of tragedy (2002 [1967]). Writing during the Vietnam War, Cavell was troubled about the way that we theatricalize others when we turn them into characters in our own story, even if it is only a story about our own helplessness – and we also theatricalize ourselves when we abdicate our responsibilities in order to avoid being recognized for who we are. But the theatre, paradoxically, is where we might be free of this theatricality. It is the place where nothing is required of you but to watch and to listen, where your own inaction is already accounted for, where the story is *not* yours and that is why you came here. It is a place to practice – indeed, *to rehearse* – your regard for others. Cavell puts it this way:

> Why do I do nothing, faced with tragic events? If I do nothing because I am distracted by the pleasures of witnessing this folly, or out of my knowledge of the proprieties of the place I am in, or because I think there will be some more appropriate time to act, or because I feel helpless to undo events of such proportion, then I continue my sponsorship of evil in the world, its sway waiting upon these forms of inaction. I exit running. But

> if I do nothing because there is nothing to do, where that means that I have given over the time and space in which action is mine and consequently that I am in awe before the fact that I cannot do and suffer what it is another's to do and suffer, then I confirm the final fact of our separateness. And that is the unity of our condition. (339)

Take a moment now to open the doors to the room you are in.

Re-reading Cavell, I pause to look out the window, a flutter, and I am reminded of another performance by Karen Christopher. In her duet with Gerard Bell called *So Below* (Haranczak/Navarre 2012), the doors to the playing space are kept open throughout the show. The performance itself has a quality that feels 'everyday': there's a gentleness and an absence of pretence to Karen's and Gerard's actions, their fragments of speech, their small acts of kindness, and so there's a pleasing harmony with the quotidian sounds that seep in from outside – at the theatre where I was in the audience, for example, I could tell that a conversation was taking place downstairs, even if I couldn't tell what the conversation was about. But watching them, I felt there was something more than just reality fluttering in, lending its unpredictability to the events in the room. For theirs was a performance made out of careful attention – attention that went into the accumulation of events and actions that they 'rehearsed' as they discovered the performance by making it, and careful attention throughout their performing of the work – attention to voice and posture and stillness and balance – and also attention in the act of viewing, the activity with which I myself was engaged. And so with the doors open, I felt not only the outside everyday seep in, but this careful attention work its way out. This precise awareness of my own awareness, of my own remove from it, of the way I come late to my own thoughts and am making them, even now, through discovering them.

The word Cavell might use for this awareness is acknowledgement.

I would like to begin

I would like to begin again with these words.

But I am repeating myself.

I would like to arrive, here at the end, and find myself waiting for me

I am trying to be here with you.

But because my words are here *for* you

They cannot be here *with* you.

*The problem is not so much that he cannot, so to speak, see over the present, but that he cannot insert a break in it; if hd narrates, then* that *is what he is doing, that has become what is now happening.* (Cavell 2002: 335)

What is it?

What is it that begins?

What is it that begins to move me?

When I weep, it is not usually because I have chosen to weep, but I want to believe that it is I who is weeping.

If it is not I, then who is it that begins to weep through me?

Who am I to think that, if I care about you, we are connected, but that we are not connected if I choose not to care?

My care is a symptom of our interconnectedness, and not its cause

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